

Hope for Positive Living: A story of hope despite late diagnosis impeding PMTCT

Elizabeth (not her real name) is a single 23-year-old young mother who hails from Kitui East Sub county, Zombe/Mwitika ward, Kathande village. In September 2018, carrying her 11-month-old infant, she presented herself at Inyuu local dispensary feeling unwell and at the back of her mind thinking the visit would be a normal one, get medication and go back home to continue her normal work. Little did she know that the occurrence at the hospital will forever change her life. After clinical enquiry, it was realized that she had been exposed to risk of HIV thus referred for HTS where she was diagnosed HIV positive and linked for care and treatment the same day. Her 11-month-old infant also received a PCR test. The PCR test for the infant turned out positive a month later (4/10/2018) and she was linked to care and treatment.

‘When I received the news, my thoughts were all over and I could not think straight’ Elizabeth recalls. All she could think of being a single mother was how to take care of her baby. Being a casual laborer, she left her child under the care of her grandmother to hunt for means of livelihood. The grandmother had no idea of the child health care needs and this resulted to defaulting, non-adherence and the child’s health deteriorating.

Early 2019, the facility staff were able to trace the child Prince*, initiate disclosure at household level and as a result he was brought back to treatment. However, they were not able to comprehensively address all needs at household level. Prince* was enrolled into the CASE-OVC project during surge in August 2019 at a facility review meeting visit to discuss CALHIV enrollment. At the time of enrollment to OVC program, Prince had a high VL of 421,718 copies/ml, non-adherence issues and non-supportive caregiver. Elizabeth and her son were linked to a case worker for monthly household follow ups and direct observation therapy was initiated at household level. As a result of these interventions, Prince has reported improved adherence and remarkable progress towards viral suppression (from 421,718 copies/ml to 22,064 copies/ml as at 5/12/2019). Facility based meeting between program staff and facility staff was held on 4th June 2020 to discuss progress in VL and as a result it was agreed that a repeat VL test to be done in the next clinical visit that was scheduled on 23/7/2020. It is expected that the child will be virally suppressed.

PMTCT interventions have proven to yield positive results, however, the interventions are impeded by numerous reasons such as late diagnosis of HIV and failure to adhere to PMTCT guidelines. Nevertheless, there’s hope in positive living through combated efforts working towards achieving UNAIDS 95-95-95 goals. For instance, for the case of Elizabeth*, if HIV diagnosis was done early enough and linked to OVC program, she could have been linked to eMTCT on time. Despite all that, she has been able to address issues of stigma and non-adherence.

Where there's will, there's way: Beyond the positive test lies a bright future.

Meet Mercy (not her real name) a mother of 52 years living with physical disability and HIV who hails from Kitui West Sub county. After her 8:4:4-education system her father opened up a kiosk for her to earn a living where she could make a profit of KES 8000 per day. In 2005 at age 37 she became pregnant and presented herself at the then Kitui General Hospital currently known as Kitui County Referral Hospital for antenatal clinic and at the back of her mind she thought that the visit would be a normal one and would return home after a short while to continue with her normal duties. She had no idea that her being at the hospital at the moment would forever change her life. As a practice at the health facility she was referred for HTS where she was diagnosed HIV positive. She found it hard to accept the status leading to denial to the extent that she refused to be linked for ART. Mercy recalls "When I received the news, my thoughts were all over and I could not think straight and remained in a state of despair". All she could think of was the fate of her unborn baby and her life after testing HIV positive. Unfortunately, she had a still birth in the same year. This was attributed to stress with effects on her unborn baby who developed fetal distress as she tried to come into terms with the reality.

Over the time, her condition deteriorated and after two years, in 2007 she presented herself to the health facility with more complications and she was diagnosed with TB. Mercy appreciates that the clinician on duty that very day was friendly, welcoming and she found a shoulder to lean on. This rejuvenated her dying self-esteem giving her hope for a brighter future. Following the clinician advice that she needed to combine anti TB drugs and ARV, she accepted to be linked for care and treatment. Through the facility, she was able to join support groups for PLWHIV which were of great help to her. Mercy reports that the psychosocial support and education received from her support group helped her stabilize regaining much hope for survival. In the year 2006, Mercy conceived again. With support of her peers in the support group and adherence counselling at the health facility, she followed to the latter the PMTCT guidelines and her baby boy was confirmed negative at 18months. "I was so happy to receive the news that my baby had turned negative knowing that God had listened to my prayers and my efforts were not in vain. This gave me more hope to work hard." Mercy says in a smiling face.

In 2011, the Catholic Diocese of Kitui was implementing a home-based care program and they needed volunteers to support their community work and different people were approached to apply for the same. At the time, Mercy had already accepted her condition and she was willing to offer part of her time to support people and children with HIV. She qualified and appointed to represent people living with HIV as a case worker. They were trained on community prevention with positives and were tasked to champion the 13 key

messages which she has been doing up to date. The trainings have been beneficial to her as an individual and she has seen many people transformed by the awareness.

Mercy says that she finds satisfaction for her work by seeing people accept themselves and live positively through her day to day encouragement by sharing about hers life experience as an example.